Women and HIV

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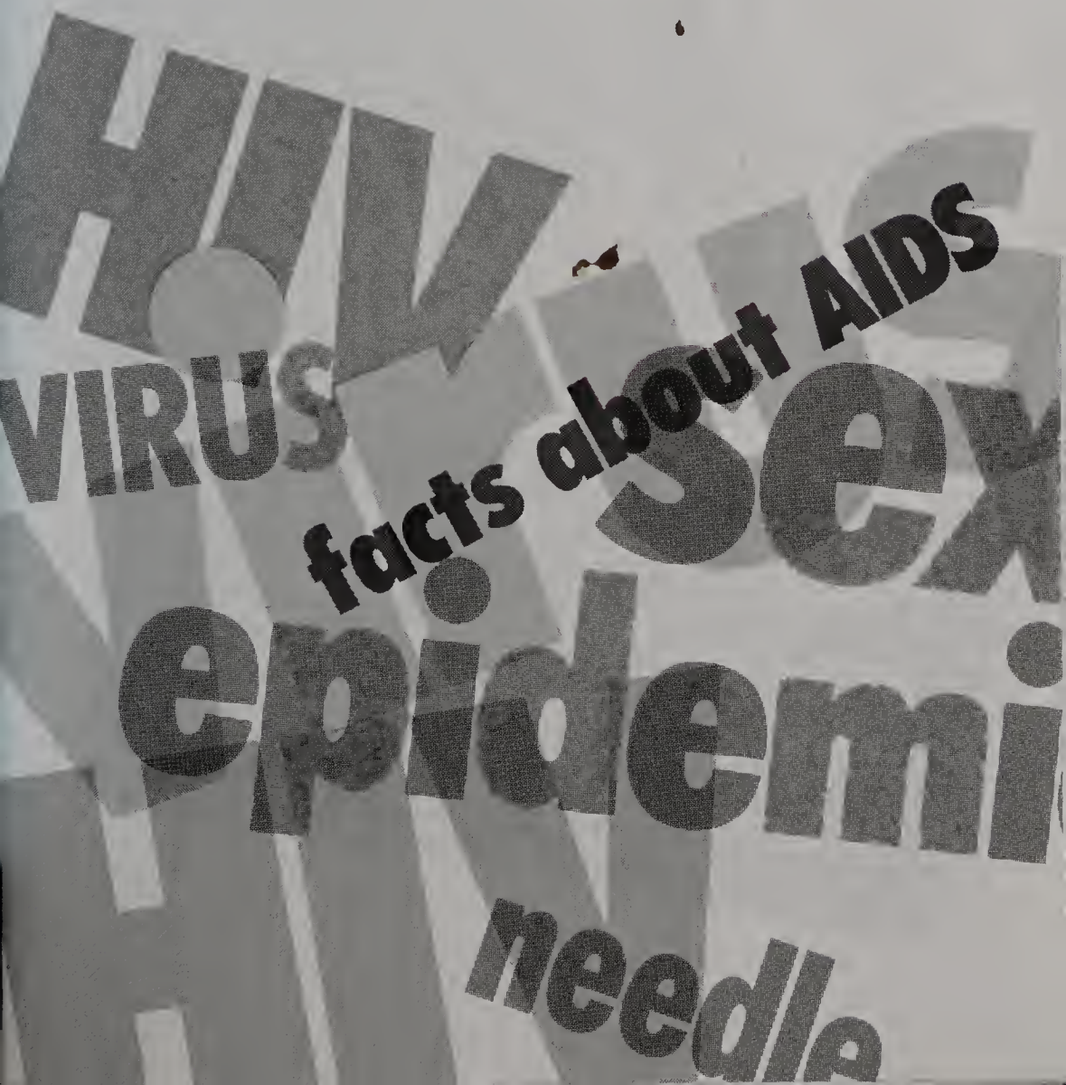

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What do women need to know about HIV and AIDS?

AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). HIV primarily affects people by attacking the body's defenses (immune system). A person who has HIV may be susceptible to diseases most healthy people can resist.

People infected with HIV can look and feel healthy and may not even know that they are infected. Even though they don't look or feel sick, they can infect others. When symptoms do appear, they can be like those of many common illnesses, and may include swollen glands, fever, and diarrhea. In some women, recurrent, hard-to-treat vaginal yeast infections and cervical cancer may be related to HIV infection. Symptoms vary from person to person. None of the symptoms necessarily indicate HIV infection. Only a blood test can tell if someone is infected with HIV. Only a doctor can diagnose AIDS.

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At this time HIV cannot be cured. Scientists expect that finding a vaccine or a cure will take many more years of research. However, we can help prevent the spread of HIV infection by learning the facts about HIV and AIDS and acting on them to protect ourselves and others.

How is HIV spread?

These are the most common ways in which HIV is spread:

- Having vaginal, oral, or anal sex with someone who is infected with HIV
- Sharing needles or syringes with someone who is infected with HIV
- From an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth, or breast feeding

HIV is not spread through everyday social activity. It is not spread through casual contact. This means that activities like hugging, touching, cuddling, kissing, and massage do not spread HIV, as long as there is no contact with an infected person's blood, semen, vaginal fluid, or breast milk.

You can't get HIV from—

- Handshakes.
- Coughs or sneezes.
- Being around an infected person.
- Food.
- Mosquitoes or other insects.

Or from using—

- Swimming pools.
- Toilet seats.
- Phones or computers.
- Straws, spoons, or cups.
- Drinking fountains.

As the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to grow, more women are becoming infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Women, like men, can get HIV infection through sex and blood-to-blood contact, such as needle sharing. Because the number of women who are becoming infected is increasing, it is important for you to know how to prevent HIV infection. As a woman, you can take responsibility for protecting your own health. When you know the facts about HIV and AIDS, you can take steps to protect yourself and others from HIV infection.

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What is risky behavior?

The following behaviors can put you at risk of HIV infection:

- Having sex (vaginal, oral, or anal) with someone who is infected.
- Sharing needles or syringes with someone who is infected.

Infected blood, semen, or vaginal fluid (including menstrual blood) can enter the body through the vagina, rectum, or mouth and the surrounding tissues. The risk of becoming infected increases if there are sores on the genitals (vagina, vulva, penis) such as those caused by herpes, syphilis, and chancroid. Sharing "sex toys" can be risky if their use involves contact with another person's blood, semen, or vaginal fluid.

It is possible to become infected from just one sexual experience or one shared needle or syringe with an infected person. If you have a sex partner who is infected, or if a person with whom you share needles is infected, you can become infected also. Keep in mind that it is not always possible to know if someone is infected. You can't tell by looking. The person who is infected may not even know.

It is possible to become infected from even one sexual experience, or one shared needle or syringe.

What about kissing?

Kissing on the cheek does not spread HIV. Even if the person kissing you has the virus, your skin helps to protect you. Although there have been no reported cases of AIDS due to open-mouth kissing, there is a theoretical risk of blood contact during prolonged, open-mouth kissing. Therefore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends against doing this with an infected partner.

If I have sex, how can I reduce my risk of infection?

► Not having sex is the only sure way to avoid the sexual transmission of HIV. However, if you decide to have sex, you can reduce your risk of infection in several ways.

► Have sex only with one partner who is not infected, who has sex only with you, and who does not share needles or syringes. (Keep in mind that it is difficult to know these things about another person.)

► Avoid contact with your partner's blood, semen, or vaginal fluid.

► When having sex, using a latex condom the right way every time greatly reduces your risk of HIV infection. (See instructions for latex condom use at the end of this brochure.)

► For vaginal or anal sex, use a water-based lubricant with the condom to reduce the risk of breakage.

► For oral sex on a man, use a condom without spermicide or lubricants.

Even if you haven't used condoms in the past, you can start using them now.

You can reduce your risk of HIV infection.

Are condoms effective?

Latex condoms greatly reduce the risk of HIV infection during sex. They offer the best protection against HIV we have today for people who have sex. They can also help protect both partners from other sexually transmitted diseases (such as syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia). To be effective, they must be used the right way—from start to finish—every time, for vaginal, oral, and anal sex.

Polyurethane (plastic) condoms are also available. They are a potential alternative to latex condoms, one that can be used by people who are allergic or sensitive to latex. At the time of this writing, they have not yet been thoroughly tested for the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Lambskin (natural) condoms are not effective for HIV prevention because of the pores (tiny holes) in the material.

Having a male partner withdraw his penis from your body before ejaculating ("coming") is **NOT** a safe alternative to using latex condoms. Pre-ejaculatory fluid ("pre-cum") in the mouth, vagina, or anus can transmit HIV.

Birth control pills, diaphragms, birth control injections or implants, and IUDs will **NOT** protect you or your partner from HIV infection or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Can female condoms and dental dams reduce my risk of HIV infection?

There are other barriers besides latex male condoms that some people use during sex. However, enough research has not yet been done to assess their effectiveness. Research shows that latex male condoms are still the most effective HIV prevention for people who have sex:

For vaginal sex, the female condom—a lubricated, polyurethane (plastic) closed tube with a ring at each end—is available. It is inserted into the vagina, and lines the walls of the vagina and covers part of the vulva (external part of the female genitals). There is some research to show that, when used consistently and correctly, the female condom can reduce the risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. However, more research is needed. The female

condom could allow women to reduce their risk without first having to convince male partners to put on condoms.

For oral contact with the vagina or anus, some HIV educators suggest using a dental dam over the area with which there will be oral contact. Some also suggest using plastic wrap or cutting a condom so that it lies flat and using it in the same way. More research is needed on how effective these methods are.

Take responsibility for protecting your health.

How can I be sure that my partner is not infected?

You can't. Many people who have HIV do not know they are infected.

Also, people are not always honest about their sexual behavior or drug use. Some people may lie, knowing that telling the truth may mean they won't "score." Some people who inject drugs may not know or remember whether they used clean or unclean needles. Some people may not want to reveal information about drug use or sexual behavior, past or present. This may be from fear of jeopardizing a current relationship, or fear of being rejected or criticized. Some people may be embarrassed or ashamed to discuss personal details of their lives. Love or marriage will not guarantee that you are safe from HIV infection if either of you has had, or now has, other sex partners, or has shared needles.

If you have concerns about your partner's past or present drug use or sexual behavior, you may want to think again about having sex. If you decide to have sex, avoid contact with blood, semen, or vaginal fluid. Take responsibility for protecting your health.

How can I talk to my partner about HIV and AIDS?

Here are some ideas to keep in mind when talking with your partner about avoiding risks:

► Protection against infection with HIV is the responsibility of both you and your partner.

► Your partner may have many of the same concerns that you do.

► Both you and your partner need to know how to avoid becoming infected with HIV. Not having sex is the only sure way to prevent HIV infection. Using a latex condom the right way every time a person has sex greatly reduces the risk of infection.

► Talk about HIV before you have sex or are in a sexual mood.

► If you have concerns about your own or your partner's past or present behavior, consider HIV-antibody testing and counseling for both of you.

► If you think you may already be HIV-infected, consider not having sex, or use latex condoms or other barriers to help protect your partner's health. Get an HIV-antibody test to be sure.

► If you know you are HIV-infected, tell your partner. **ALWAYS** use a latex condom or other barrier if you decide to have sex.

You have a right to ask about your partner's past and present behavior (your partner also has a right to ask the same of you). Waiting until you have already had sex with the person may be too late.

Talking about HIV prevention may be impossible if you are in an abusive or violent relationship. Raising sensitive subjects like HIV may increase tension. If you cannot talk about HIV or using condoms without having a fight, consider seeking help from a counselor or someone else who can help with relationship problems. Check your local yellow pages directory or call your local public health department for information about shelters for battered or abused women in your area.

If you have questions about HIV and AIDS and sex, call your local Red Cross chapter or the CDC National AIDS Hotline (toll free): 1-800-342-AIDS.

What about sexual assault and rape?

If you are raped or sexually assaulted, you may be at risk of infection if the person who raped or assaulted you is HIV-infected. Call your local police department or rape crisis center for help. They can counsel you, and offer information about HIV-antibody counseling and testing.

What about drugs?

Sharing needles or syringes for injecting drugs ("shooting" or "skin popping") is not safe. Sharing even one needle with someone who is infected can infect you with HIV. If you have shared needles, or if you have a sex partner who has shared needles, even once, you may have been infected—even if you are off drugs now.

Because HIV is spread through infected blood, do not use any needles that have been used by other people for tattoos or ear piercing or for injecting drugs like steroids, hormones, or insulin, or other substances like vitamins. Do not share any object that can break the skin.

Both drugs and alcohol can affect judgment and impair thinking. People under the influence of drugs or alcohol may be more likely to do things that put them at risk of becoming infected with HIV.

You can find out information about treatment to stop using drugs by calling the National Institute of Drug Abuse Hotline (toll free): 1-800-662-HELP.

How can people who use needles to inject drugs prevent HIV infection?

The most effective way to prevent HIV infection through drug use is to stop injecting drugs.

People who inject drugs can prevent HIV infection by—

- Using **new** sterile equipment every time.
- **Never** sharing needles or syringes.

When more effective prevention is not possible, drug equipment may be cleaned with bleach to reduce the risk of HIV infection. Contact your local drug treatment center, health department, or AIDS-service organization for more information on how to clean drug equipment.

What about pregnancy?

Women can become infected before, during, and after pregnancy by having sex or sharing needles and syringes with an infected person. Infected women who become pregnant may infect their babies during pregnancy, birth, or breast feeding.

About 25 percent of the babies born to infected mothers are infected themselves. However, in a recent study, AZT (zidovudine) given to both pregnant women and their babies after birth reduced the rate of infection in babies to 8 percent.

If you are pregnant or considering pregnancy, talk to your doctor or health care provider. The United States Public Health Service encourages women to adopt prevention behavior and to seek voluntary HIV-antibody counseling and testing.

If you are considering artificial insemination, it is important to keep in mind that semen from an HIV-infected man can put you at risk for HIV infection. You can protect yourself by pursuing artificial insemination through a sperm bank that follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for HIV screening for donors.

How else do children get HIV?

Like adults, children and teens can get HIV through sex or by sharing drug needles or syringes with an infected person.

Children and teens who are sexually abused may be at risk of infection if the offender has HIV. If you know of a child or teen who is being abused, call the National Child Abuse Hotline (toll free): 1-800-422-4453, or your local child welfare agency.

Before testing of the blood supply began in 1985, some children became infected with HIV from infected blood transfusions and certain blood products (used to treat diseases like hemophilia). This is now very rare.

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How safe is the blood supply?

Since 1985, when testing of all donated blood and blood products for HIV began, the chances of getting HIV from a blood transfusion in the United States have been very low. Now, with even more accurate tests, the risk is extremely low. The blood supply is protected in several ways. For example, people who indicate that they are at risk of being infected with certain germs, including HIV, are excluded from giving blood. Also, all donated blood is tested for HIV antibodies. If antibodies to HIV are found, the blood is destroyed.

Testing cannot completely eliminate all infected blood from the blood supply. Some recently infected people, not knowing they are infected, may give blood. Blood tests now in use look for antibodies to HIV. These tests may not be able to detect antibodies in the blood of some recently infected people. A 1995 joint Red Cross/CDC study reported that the risk of becoming infected through a blood transfusion was about 1 in 450,000 to 1 in 660,000. Scientists are working to improve existing procedures and create new testing procedures that would make the blood supply even safer.

What is the HIV-antibody blood test?

This test tells if a person has been infected with HIV by detecting antibodies to the virus in the blood (the body produces antibodies to fight off disease agents). The blood tests used today are over 99 percent accurate. People who think they may be at risk of HIV infection are encouraged to seek HIV-antibody counseling and testing.

For more information about HIV testing and counseling, contact your local public health department, AIDS service organization, Red Cross chapter, or doctor's office.

What can I do to help?

Know the facts about HIV and AIDS. Use what you have learned to help protect yourself and others. Share the facts about HIV and AIDS with your family, friends, and co-workers.

Set an example for others. Show support and caring for people living with HIV and AIDS. Remember, you can't get HIV from being a friend.

Become a volunteer. Call your local Red Cross or AIDS-service organization to find out how you can help.

Sponsor an AIDS fund-raising event or donate money.

Become a Red Cross HIV/AIDS instructor.

For more information about HIV and AIDS, contact—

- Your local Red Cross chapter.
- The CDC National AIDS Hotline (toll free): 1-800-342-AIDS. For Spanish-speaking persons, Línea Nacional de SIDA: 1-800-344-7432. For deaf and hearing-impaired persons, TTY/TDD Hotline: 1-800-AIDS-TTY.
- Your doctor or other health care provider.
- Your local or state public health department.
- Your local AIDS-service organization.

Red Cross HIV/AIDS programs:

The Red Cross has Basic, African American, Hispanic, and Workplace HIV/AIDS education programs. Act Smart (an age-graded youth curriculum developed in cooperation with Boys and Girls Clubs of America) is also available. Contact your local Red Cross for more information.

How to use a condom ("rubber")

- Use condoms made of latex.*
- Store condoms in a cool, dry place, away from heat and sun.
- Use a new condom each time you have sex.** Check the expiration date on the condom. Do not use expired condoms or condoms that are yellowed, sticky, or brittle.
- Handle the condom carefully so as not to damage it with fingernails, teeth, or other sharp objects.
- Put on the condom when the penis is erect and before any vaginal, oral, or anal contact.
- Pinch the tip of the condom so that air will not be trapped, and unroll the condom all the way down the erect penis. If the condom does not have a receptacle end, leave space at the tip for semen ("cum").
- Use a water-based lubricant on the outside of the condom so that it will be less likely to break. Do not use oil-based lubricants (such as petroleum jelly, shortening, mineral oil, massage oil, body lotion). Oil-based lubricants can cause a condom to break.
- Hold the condom at the base of the penis and withdraw while the penis is still erect to prevent slippage. Remove the condom, being careful not to spill the contents. Throw the condom away. Do not use a condom more than once.

* Polyurethane (plastic) condoms are used by some people, including those who are allergic or sensitive to latex condoms. At the time of this writing, however, they have not yet been thoroughly tested for HIV and sexually transmitted disease prevention.

** Latex condoms used the right way every time a person has sex greatly reduce the risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. Not having sex is the most effective way to prevent HIV infection through sex.

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